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The Collective Repression of 'Pathos' in Organization Studies

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Abstract. *This paper analyses, from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, the specific way in which rationalist utilitarianism has influenced both organizational practices and the experts' way of thinking about organizations from the birth of the discipline until the rise of organizational symbolism in the 1970s. The hegemony of the rationalist paradigm—it is argued—led the scientific community to a sort of collective repression of the expressive dimensions of organizational life. The forms of this repression and the expedients adopted to reduce the cognitive dissonance created by this kind of blindness are explored.* ***Key words.*** *aesthetic competence; expressiveness; organizational symbolism; pathos; rationalist utilitarianism*

To readers who belong to the younger generations, and so 20 or 25 years ago were not yet part of the scientific community of organizational scholars, it will seem quite normal that in June 2005 a conference called *The Passion for Learning and Knowing* took place in Trento. Nobody, among participants, believed they were taking part in some unusual event that might call into question academic respectability. Emotions, passions, tacit or aesthetic—in the general sense of the word—knowledge and experience are now perfectly legitimate research topics for people studying organizational decision-making, change and learning. Those attending the Trento Conference shared a specific interest for understanding how passion and emotions influence learning and knowledge, but few people in our scientific community (even those who are not particularly concerned with these topics) would dare

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deny these dimensions have a role, whether small or large, in determining what and how we learn and know.

But that is not how things were in the early 1980s. Those who took part in the foundation and the early years of the Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism (SCOS) might remember that the *casus belli* leading to the creation of this group—founded as an independent offshoot of EGOS and crucial in determining what was later described as the 'cultural turn' in organization studies—was the response of some participants at an EGOS conference to a paper by Per Olof Berg, entitled 'Emotional Structures in Organizations'. The topic was simply considered out of place and inappropriate in an academic conference on organization studies. The paper was viewed as being scandalous because the subject, and the way it was handled, overtly called into question the implicit assumptions of the then dominant paradigm in our scientific community. That paradigm had dominated almost unchallenged until then, and (like all paradigms) filtered out some dimensions of the subject being studied by concealing or hindering the vision of others.

What the paradigm failed to take into account was a fundamental part of human experience: the way we perceive and feel reality and the sensory experience, giving rise to attraction and repulsion, pleasure and disgust, suffering and joy. To better understand why this aspect of human experience was neglected, we might take a step backwards in time to the origin of the process of modernization, described by Weber as the 'disenchantment of the world'.

The deep cultural change we usually associate with the advent of 'modernity' (considered to be the outcome of the Enlightenment and the scientific-industrial revolution) was unmistakably characterized by the rise of rationalist utilitarianism as a hegemony, introducing precise new distinctions and hierarchies to the dimensions and spheres of social life. Firstly, with the advent of modernity the pair 'gratuity-utility' assumed a central position among the opposed pairs of cultural concepts used by members of advanced Western societies to analyse, describe and structure their experience of the real: this pairing distinguishes clearly between a gratuitous action, which does not seek or expect any recompense or earnings, and an interested action, aimed at procuring a specific benefit of some kind for the actor. More in general this pairing refers to the distinction between expressiveness and instrumentality, between the 'expressive' action (or aesthetic action in the wider sense of the term), shaped by impulse and feeling, and the pragmatic ('impressive') action, forged by reason in terms of the goal or aim to be achieved. But most importantly the rationalist utilitarian culture subordinates one term in the pair to the other: activity, work and production become undeniably more important than contemplation, leisure and play. Beauty is sacrificed to the useful, and logical-scientific knowledge is affirmed as a superior form of knowledge to aesthetic-intuitive knowledge.

In this cultural climate the 'bureaucratic' administration model, founded on the principles of instrumental rationality, legality and certainty, gradually replaced (thanks to its intrinsic technical superiority) other forms of administering the economy and the state. On the social scene, utilitarian organizations—i.e. forms of social aggregation deliberately built to achieve specific aims and basically governed by instrumental rationality—gradually replaced community forms of social aggregation, based on shared values, traditions and feelings. This cultural climate also deeply conditioned the way the nascent discipline entrusted with the task of studying the new social artifacts called 'organizations' defined its own goals and epistemology. If modern organizations are by definition the dominion of a legal-rational ethos and are characterized by pragmatic behaviour, they cannot host expressive disinterested behaviour, triggered off by impulses, emotions, and ideal aspirations. And if these behaviours are found in organizations, they will only be secondary, irrelevant and probably harmful. This vision of early organizational scholars was crystallized in a paradigm, which turned out to be extraordinarily enduring in the subsequent decades.

My point is that the hegemony of rationalist utilitarianism has influenced both the life of organizations—the 'social' practices found in them—and the experts' way of thinking about organizations (their 'analytical' practices). I have demonstrated elsewhere (Gagliardi, 2005) how gratuity and expressiveness, although locked out by utilitarian organizations, sneak back in by dressing up in such forms as to avoid the mechanisms of social censure aimed at preserving the image of organizations as an exclusive and unspoiled dominion of instrumental rationality. Moreover, on the basis of mainly ethnographic research analysing the weaving between technical requirements and expressive needs in organizations, I have identified the most frequent forms the gratuitous assumes in utilitarian organizations.

What I would especially like to discuss here, however, from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, is the specific way in which the culture of rationalist utilitarianism has influenced how experts approached the study of organizations. If we conventionally establish the birth of the discipline at the beginning of the last century with Taylor's studies, the specialist knowledge on organizations produced for around 80 years has ignored the expressive dimension of organizational life insofar as the scientific community has operated a kind of amazing collective repression of 'pathos'. I will examine the forms of this repression and expedients adopted both to reduce the cognitive dissonance inevitably created by the self-evidence of what they did not wish to see, and to justify the self-evident when it was impossible to deny it.

Until the 1930s organizations were described as perfect machines, to be built and managed according to universally valid principles. At that time organizational theory was basically a normative discipline, aimed at illustrating the features that an organization ought to have, rather than the working mechanisms of real organizations. Any science of designing, however, is based on sciences of observation, and just as building science cannot ignore, for example, the laws of physics, a science aiming to identify the constructive principles of a social system able to cooperate to reach a specific end cannot ignore, for example, the psychological laws influencing the will to cooperate. But theoreticians of organizations failed to take into account the complexity and the ambiguity of the workings of the psyche (just being explored at that time by psychoanalysis) and preferred to base their normative theories on a single utilitarian postulate, i.e. the individual will collaborate to achieve a collective goal, only if he or she obtains direct material benefits in exchange.

At the end of the 1930s, when the first great empirical research project on the conditions favouring productivity in human work was carried out at Hawthorne, all research hypotheses were based on rationalist utilitarianism. It was supposed that people will give more, if they get more in terms of salary, a comfortable environment and sustainable work rhythms. But it was at Hawthorne that gratuity emerged in all its force as an irrepressible human need: the workers did not produce more according to utilitarian calculations or perceived material benefits but to please researchers with whom they had spontaneously established relations of complicity and friendship. But far from calling into question the dominant paradigm, this discovery was absorbed by the paradigm: if feelings count, then they are an extra resource in orienting the activities to achieve the organizational goals, and a factor to be included in the algorithm on which the efficiency of the co-operative system depends.

From the 1940s onwards the interest in understanding the working dynamics of real organizations grew. Organizational studies were increasingly characterized as a positive science, but the focus was selectively on instrumental, measurable material aspects. The widespread implicit idea that organizations are the best social artifact embodying the rationalist ideal of modernity interpretatively filtered out all other data. The firm was basically seen as an economy and not as a community, and concrete behaviours were observed in terms of how far they adhere to or depart from the ideal model.

Selznick (1949, 1957) was the first to observe that any organizational machinery designed rationally gradually loses its purity. From a sterile mechanical apparatus it becomes an institution impregnated with ideals and gratuity. But he considered this process to be pathological. It is symptomatic that by metaphorically applying constructs elaborated in clinical psychology to social systems, he described the informal organization and the ideology as 'defense' mechanisms, i.e. as mechanisms inhibiting and transforming the needs of the organizational system which cannot *legitimately* be expressed in the formal organization and find an outlet, on one hand, in the spontaneity of activities and daily relations, and on the other, in the idealization of the 'mission' and the 'character' of the organization. Paradoxically, therefore, the process of institutionalization—making the organization a desirable object of identification for individuals and a vehicle for collective gratification—is viewed by Selznick as an intrinsically 'degenerative' process.

Only a few other scholars (Blau, 1955; Crozier, 1967; Dalton, 1959; Gouldner, 1954) have worked in the framework of Selznick's realistic and interpretive point of view—albeit without sharing his nostalgia. In fact to a large degree, organizational and managerial studies were dominated until the early 1970s by the rationalist positivist paradigm placing at the top of the research agenda the analysis of relations between objective measurable variables, and overlooking the ideational and symbolic aspects of organizational life. Only at the end of the 1970s researchers interested in organizational symbolism claim that organizations are primarily cultures, characterized by distinct 'local' paradigms—to be analysed therefore using holistic and interpretative research models—and place hitherto overlooked ideational and symbolic aspects at the top of the research agenda. This movement's intellectual manifesto can be summed up in Duby's remark (1986) that each productive practice is determined equally by the practical needs at its origin and by specific world visions, and that no productive practice is exclusively such, but simultaneously becomes a symbolic practice. The movement came into being as a marginal and anti-conformist phenomenon but rapidly emerged (as we all now know) as one of the main currents of thought in organizational studies. Today it is arguably no longer simply a current, since its basic assumptions are considered premises that no-one would now challenge.

It is interesting to note, however, that the power of the previous paradigm initially conditioned organizational culture researchers, who for several years continued to have a kind of cognitivist bias. Two orders of factors were considered in general the components of culture: beliefs and values. Beliefs refer to the ontological and epistemological component of culture ('logos')—corresponding to cognitive experience, values to the ethical and deontological component ('ethos'). Almost nobody, however, talked about 'tastes' and sensory experience. Organizations were still seen as bodies of thoughts and sets of thinking practices. Students of culture were mainly concentrated on linguistic representations (such as myths and stories) of a culture and on behaviour patterns (such as rituals in modern bureaucratic organizations). The widespread emphasis placed on the definition of culture in terms of 'system of meanings' was itself an indication of this general leaning. And some of us wondered whether in their search for 'sense' organizational culture researchers hadn't too hastily skimmed over the 'senses' (Gagliardi, 1990). Paradoxically enough, those scholars generally flourished a phenomenological loyalty. They probably ignored what the late Claudio Ciborra (2003) pointed out in his last unpublished paper ('Getting to the Hearth of the Situation: The Phenomenological Roots of Situatedness'): Heidegger—one of the founding fathers of phenomenological philosophy—used the term 'befindlichkeit' to define situatedness, when translating creatively Aristotle's concept of *pathos*, and in his vision situatedeness not only refers to the circumstances one finds himself or herself in, but also to his or her inner disposition, mood, affectedness and emotion.

Only some time later, starting from the early 1990s, the awareness began to spread, that there exists a third fundamental component to human experience, 'pathos', the way we perceive and feel reality, and that 'tastes' and 'sensory' knowledge are at least as important as 'beliefs', 'values' and intellectual knowledge. Emphasis on 'pathos' characterized at least three distinct strands of research: the study of artifacts and organizational aesthetics (Gagliardi, 1996; Ramirez, 1991; Strati, 1992); the analysis of the role played by emotions in utilitarian organizations (Fineman, 1993) and the narrative approach to organization studies (Czarniawska, 1997; Czarniawska and Gagliardi, 2003). These three strands of research, though they differ from each other in their subject-matter, methods and reference disciplines, share the same epistemological premise: the heuristic value of exploring the spaces lying 'between the organization as regulatory (the Law) and as experience (the Body)' (Linstead and Höpfl, 2000).

Bringing the 'pathos', for so long repressed, to the forefront of the research agenda of organizational scholars, resulted in a radical change of the object (the researched), the subject (the researcher), and the research methods. Impulses, emotions, sensations become legitimate topics of inquiry, and organizations appear worth exploring as formative contexts, that harbour, receive and deliver, not only the explicit knowledge that can be transmitted by formal and systematic language but also the tacit, local, hardly formalizable knowledge profoundly rooted in action, which cannot be transmitted through verbal language. At the same time, researchers cast off the fetters inherited from the positivist paradigm: they can now use both their intellectual and sensory knowledge, relying not only on rational understanding but also on the 'intelligence of feeling' (Witkin, 1974). Finally, new developments in reflection on the practice of ethnography break the monopoly of traditional fieldwork techniques, highlighting the researcher's 'sensuality' as a prime tool with which to understand reality (Stoller, 1997). And a new awareness gradually arises within our scientific community: that richer accounts of organizational life can be given if we free ourselves of a fundamental principle of scientific positivism, namely that 'scientific' language should be rigorously analytical and forgo any form of eloquence that appeals to the sentiments and passion rather than to cold reason.

Looking at 'pathos' in organizations, and using our own 'aesthetic competence' as an interpretive tool, can significantly increase our understanding of organizational dynamics. A wonderful example has been provided by Martin (2002), who 20 years previously collected rich 'sensory' data on residential organizations for the elderly. She wrote, however, a poor account of her experience, because the then dominant positivist paradigm compelled her to leave her aesthetic judgements and bodily sensations out of the story. After taking part in a workshop on organizational aesthetics, Martin returned to her field notes and 'discovered' that different aesthetic landscapes served to shape and maintain different political and social identities.

What is the moral we can draw from this roundup of the evolution of our discipline? Should we suppose that our colleagues who were in their prime 30 or 40 years ago knew nothing about the expressive dimension of organizational life or were any less shrewd, sensitive and intelligent than us? Arguably it would be more logical to admit—as Pepper (1942) and later Morgan (1986) have pointed out—that those entrusted by society with the task of producing expert knowledge on organizations use the same reductive methods, the same simple images taken from the quotidian as those used daily in the production of 'common sense' knowledge: what is then selected or neglected, emphasized or ignored, and seen or not seen depends on the spirit of the age and the cultural climate inspiring and molding the forms of thought, in the scientific community and in society at large.

Today the limits of the traditional paradigm appear self-evident and arguably we think we now have the right keys to understand the world we live in. But that is not the case. We struggle to accept the idea that humans constantly simplify the reality they are experiencing for reasons of cognitive economy. These reasons are even more cogent when the collectivity we belong to is an organization, in which, by definition, the mental processes are aimed at—and subordinate to—the urgency of action. And we have even more difficulty in accepting the idea that we ourselves resort to simplifying categories, almost as if the awareness of cultural processes immunized us and enabled us to solidly and infallibly preserve a vision of the world embracing all its irreducible complexity, nuances, contradictions and ambiguities.

The narrative of this kind of blindness which seems to have affected our colleagues for over three-quarters of the last century holds then a lesson for us: the paradigm now justifying new areas of study and new analytical methods, like all paradigms, enables us to see some things more clearly but also probably conceals others. Only the awareness of the intrinsic fragility of our tools of knowledge will enable us to make progress in our intellectual work and perhaps understand more in the future.

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